

BETRAYAL AT THE BORDER

by Mark M. Bello

EXCERPT

As Emma got older, she noticed things that provided a better understanding of her parents' fear. After dinner, her parents often watched the evening news. Emma witnessed people protesting at the southern border to Mexico and heard phrases like 'send them back' and 'build the wall.' Video footage of arrests, family separations, and kids in cages was heartbreaking. Emma was a free American like her friends and neighbors, but she would never be free of worry that her parents might be captured. Mainstream media considered families like hers 'undocumented.' Over time, Emma understood the reason why her parents broke the rules and kept the family secret. Because Miguel and Mary Carmen were undocumented, they couldn't travel, not even across the northern border into Canada from Detroit, so they never took vacations. Emma and her family never went anywhere.

While Emma understood, she was still slightly conflicted. She learned about crime in school. People who did bad things went to jail. It was 'illegal' to steal, to hurt someone, and to drink and drive. Mama and Papa didn't do any of those things. They obeyed every American rule. They were decent people, good neighbors, and solid citizens. How could they be criminals?

Mama and Papa's citizenship status was not a subject of conversation in the community. Few people knew they were undocumented because while some people embraced immigrants, others tried to make their lives difficult. Landlords were encouraged not to rent to 'foreigners,' and employers were encouraged not to hire them. Some communities attempted to block immigrant access to jobs, housing, education, and healthcare, a coordinated strategy to prevent large numbers from moving into those communities or neighborhoods. Citizens didn't want 'brown people' swooping in and taking their jobs. Other communities embraced immigration and thrived because hard-working immigrants started businesses, worked for other citizens or independently, provided childcare service, housekeeping, or odd repair jobs.

One evening, after dinner, the newsman said President Golding was considering a series of raids on immigrants in targeted areas around the country. One of the areas mentioned was Detroit. Golding said it was time to ‘deport the undocumented in fairness to those who enter our country legally and obey our laws.’ Did those people complain or something? Emma pondered.

“Mama, what does ‘deport’ mean?” Emma asked inquisitively after the newscast ended.

“It means people who are here without proper papers might get sent back to the country they came from, hija,” Mary Carmen advised.

“What does ice have to do with it?” Emma glanced at the refrigerator.

“Pardon me?”

“They talked about ice on television.”

Mary Carmen looked at the refrigerator and smiled. “They weren’t talking about ice from the fridge, hija; they were talking about immigration policemen. ICE stands for Immigration and Customs Enforcement, I—C—E. Get it?”

“What does this ICE do?”

“They find people who are here without proper papers. If people can’t prove they are citizens or have a right to be citizens, they get sent back to the country they came from.”

“Can that happen to you and Papa? Do you have these proper papers? Are you and Papa criminals, Mama?”

“That’s a difficult question to answer. Papa and I came to this country a long time ago. We arrived legally and followed all of the rules, but our papers expired before we could become citizens. We were supposed to go back to Venezuela, but you were just a baby, and it was dangerous back home. Here in America, Papa had a good job; we had a nice home, and lots of friends and relatives in the area. We couldn’t possibly go back to the old country.

“We decided to stay and try to work out our paper problem later. As the years went by, the government made it more difficult for us to become citizens. We were caught in a trap. We weren’t supposed to stay, but we couldn’t go back, either.”

“What are you going to do? The newsman on television says ICE is coming to Detroit.”

“I don’t know, sweetheart. Papa says everything will be okay. Maybe they won’t come to Lincoln Park. Maybe they will only come to Detroit. All we can do is hope and pray.”

“From now on, I’ll say a special prayer at bedtime, Mama.”

“Oh, Emma, thank you! That makes me feel so much better. I’m positive God will listen to you. You are my special little girl!”

Emma almost burst with pride. She would pray extra hard tonight. Mama and Papa were counting on her.